Running an online course

Top tips for engaging with people on screens

Going online

When meeting face to face isn't possible, technology has given us an amazing ability to stay connected to the families that we are trying to support. It also allows for those who previously might not have been able to attend a group – perhaps because of childcare, disability or travel difficulties – to join in so that they can meet, discuss and share.

Many of the skills you use to lead a face to face group are the same but there are some real differences. Rob Parsons, our founder and chairman who has spoken to over a million people in the last fifty years, has recently recorded his top ten tips for speaking into a camera.

Here are some of the things we've found really helpful to consider while planning an online course, to help everyone make the most of the online experience.

Recruit your team

### Is there someone to be your co-leader?

It can be really helpful to have someone else helping you welcome the group online and who is free to keep the conversation going. Having at least one person who likes to chat and will do so right from the beginning helps others relax and makes the experience more uplifting and fun.

Is there someone who can help you with tech support?

It can be really hard to concentrate on the content, the participants and the technical side all at the same time! Having someone who is able to help you administrate the video call will enable you to focus on the people. This might involve setting up the call, sharing their screen so everyone can view the PowerPoint or videos, muting them for conversations, playing music or a countdown clock during conversations and providing any helpful information in the chat box.

Are you from a faith based community or organisation?

You might want to ask someone to be a prayer partner. Having someone praying for you can be very encouraging and a great support.
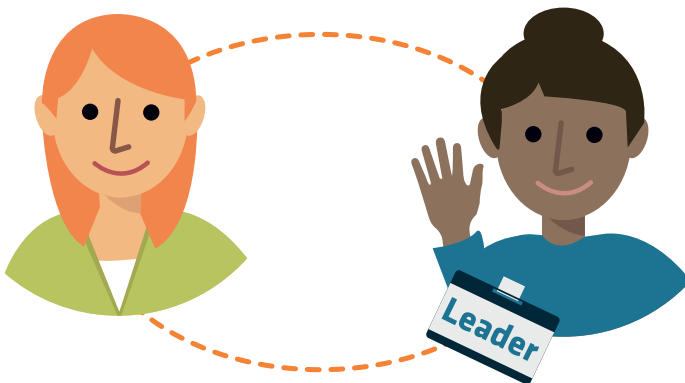
Get your tech set up

Which video conferencing software will you use?

Think through whether you want an interactive approach or more of a presentation approach. A Facebook 'watch party' is simple to set up but isn't as easy for people to engage with compared to Zoom, Teams or Skype. If this is all new to you, look for the platform's online training content to help get you started.

If there are likely to be more than 6 people in the group, choose a platform where you can see the majority of participants on the screen at the same time. A 'break out room' option can be useful too. Make sure you can share your screen so everyone can watch the video or see the PowerPoint at the same time.
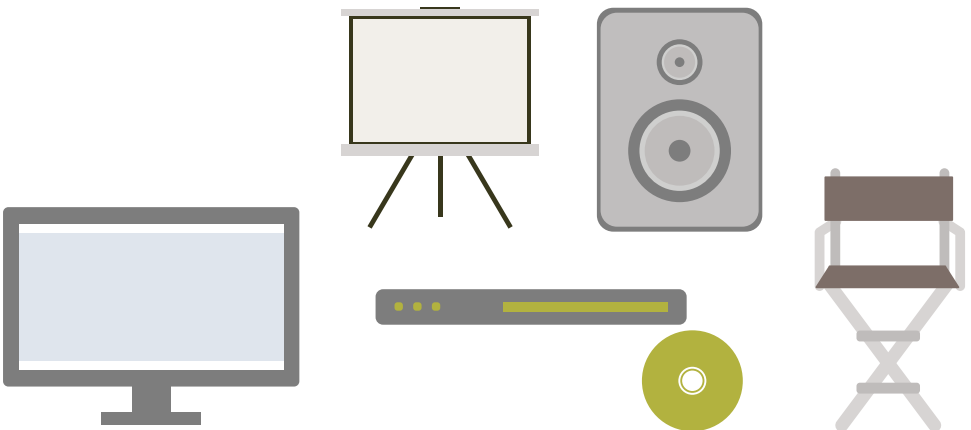
Are you tech savvy?

Practice using the software. Do you know how to allow people into the meeting? Can you mute and unmute everyone? Or set up break out rooms? If possible make sure you are using a reliable internet connection – using an Ethernet cable might improve the connection and be better than using wifi.

What if the technology fails?

We love it when technology works but it can also let us down. Have a backup plan. You could put together a worksheet ready to send out or have a pre-planned date and time to reconvene.

Arrange your course details

When will you run the course?

Whether you are looking to set up for the first time or relaunch your course, it's still best to set a regular time. You might find the best time for your online course is different to a live group gathering. If your participants have very small children, a post-lunch session while the kids are napping might work. While people are commuting far less, a breakfast session could be an option. At peak times of internet use, consider starting the meeting off the hour, for example 10.10 am or 7.40 pm.

Do you need to send out anything in advance?

People may have a lower commitment level with an online course. Sending them the handbook or notes, free or paid for, shows the value of the course and will motivate them to stay actively involved.
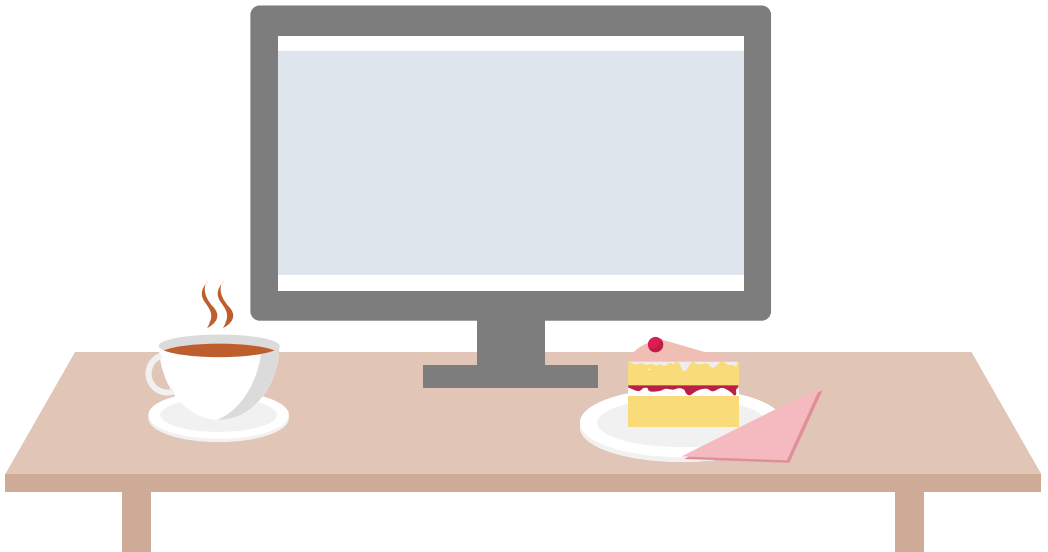
What about safeguarding?

When people register, be clear in your confirmation that what is said during the course stays confidential to those on the course – see below for some group guidelines to send out before starting. This means that both you and the participants need to be aware of any other people in the room who could be listening to the conversations. If possible, everyone in the room should be visible to the camera, so all the participants can see who is listening to them talking.

If you're running a parenting course it's an opportunity for participants to reflect on parenting, so you may want to suggest parents can take it in turns to watch the children for the session, or save up some screen time so the children can watch something of their own safely whilst parents attend the course.

If a participant doesn't have access to a quiet room where conversations aren't overheard, consider asking them to use headphones to respect confidentiality amongst the group and to protect their children too.

Follow your usual safeguarding procedures if anything is said or seen during the session that could be a safeguarding risk.

Getting the word out

How will you promote your course?

This could be via email, WhatsApp, text message or on social media, individually or to local groups.

Do you want to know who's coming before the first session?

Provide a way for people to book onto the course. Will it help you as the group leader to have 'met' the participants beforehand in a chat by phone or videocall?

When will you send a reminder before the course starts?

Make sure you have everyone's contact details to send a reminder, by email, text or message.

Consider setting up a Facebook event, as this will send an automatic notification to remind people to log in.

What will participants need to do before they come?

Some participants may need to download an app or software. To make sure everyone is well prepared, send everyone instructions on how to do this well ahead of time and ask anyone who needs support to contact you.

You might like to send out a few guidelines for when they log in to the call, for example:

- Please turn your video camera on when you join the meeting.
- Please try to join from a quiet place if possible, or mute your microphone during discussions if there's other noises around you.
- If you will have children or other adults not doing the course in your room with you, please use headphones to keep the conversations confidential for everyone. Please don't record or take a screen shot during this course.
- When you join the meeting try to make sure that the light isn't behind you as your face will be in shadow and people can't see you. Ideally have a light in front of you to the side, not directly behind the screen/camera.

You could consider sending out a starter question related to the topic of the first session to think about, so they are ready to chat as soon as they log in.
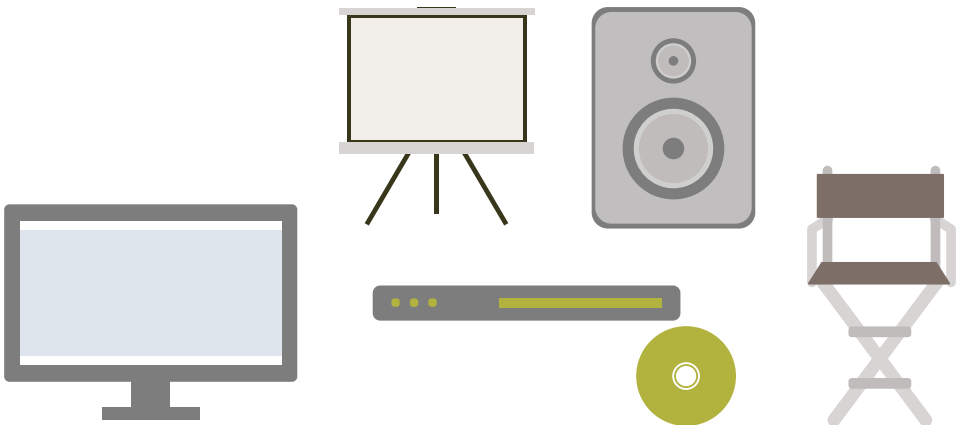
Prepare your 'stage'

How do you look on screen?

When you're on a video call you are just as much 'on show' as you would be at a face to face meeting. Dress appropriately and choose your background carefully so nothing distracts the participants. Are there photos, pictures or ornaments that you don't want people to see? Look at yourself in the camera: can people see you clearly? Is it a good angle? Are you in focus? If there's a light source behind you then it will be difficult to see your face.

Ensure your device is still, either on a firm surface or a tripod, and at the right height – the camera should be at or just above eye level. If you're going to share your screen, protect your privacy by making sure you don't have anything else open on your PC/laptop/phone that you wouldn't want others to see.

Have you timed your session?

It's helpful to have a session plan with rough timings to help you keep on track. Do allow plenty of time for discussions. We've found people seem to talk as much if not more online!

Make sure you know your material and running order well. Watch Rob Parsons talk about the <u>importance of practising what you're going to say, evaluating, using bullet points and placing your notes carefully near your camera</u>.

It can be tiring to concentrate on a screen meeting for too long; we think 60–90 minutes is about right for an online session.
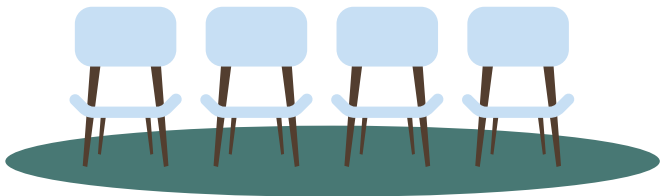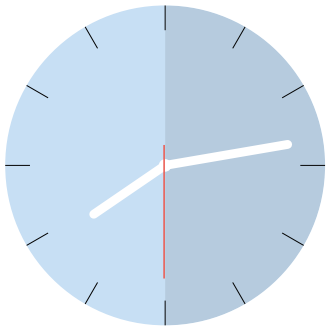
On the day

When will you 'arrive'?

Just as you would for a face to face session, arrive early, perhaps 15 minutes ahead of the advertised start time. This allows you to check that your technology is working well and to sort out any issues. You'll then be free to welcome everyone when they log in.

How will you support people who find it hard to log in?

It's a good idea to give the participants a way to message or call whoever is dealing with the tech side on the day, whether that's you or your co-leader. If they have last minute technical difficulties or lose the joining instructions, it will be easier for you if they call the person who can help them, rather than calling the person who is trying to start the course and welcoming the rest of the group.

Some group leaders have asked people to log in 15 minutes before they start to check their technology is working, then go away and make themselves a cup of tea before returning at the start time!

How will you welcome everyone?

Make sure to welcome everyone personally. You can ask some simple questions, for example, "Did you find it ok logging in?" "What have you been doing today?"

Avoid getting some participants to introduce themselves before everyone has arrived – they'll either have to repeat it or some people will miss out on hearing who everyone else is.

You could put a topic question up on a PowerPoint slide, share your screen and ask people to comment in the chat box while they wait for others to join.

In later sessions, you could put participants into groups of three in breakout rooms as soon as they join the call with a couple of starter questions, an icebreaker or catching up on how their week has gone, and bring them all back together as soon as you can see everyone is online.
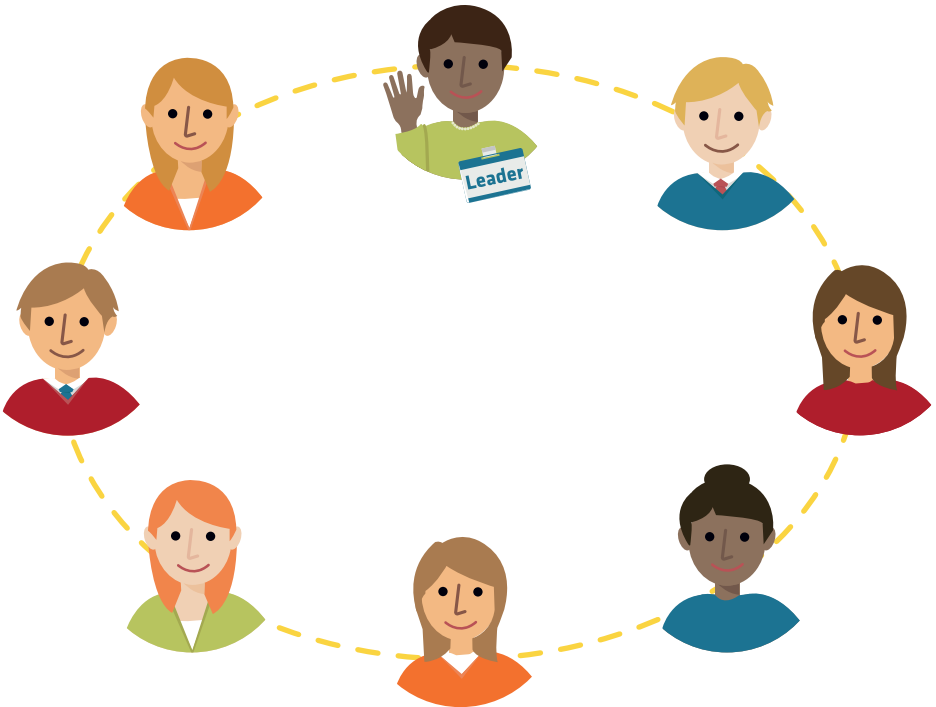
How will you establish the guidelines for the group?

At the start of the session remind people that the quality of the call can vary. Ask for their patience and grace. Some participants will be less tech-savvy than others, so it can be very helpful and reassuring to go through how to turn on their video, when to mute or unmute, how to use the chat, etc. As with a face to face group, group guidelines are important for everyone to feel respected and valued.

Example guidelines for an online group:

- Please feel free to use the chat options for positive, helpful communication during the sessions.

- It's always OK to say 'pass' if you don't want to take part or answer a particular question.

- Try not to talk over each other. If two people talk at the same time then the audio can cut out. We've found if you'd like to share something while someone else is talking, you can use the 'hands up' emoji if available on your chosen video software, or simply raise your hand and the session leader can then ask you.

- All sessions are confidential and we ask you to respect the other participants by not sharing discussions with others. What is 'said in the room stays in the room'. As with face to face contact, if the session leader has a safeguarding concern they will talk to that person separately afterwards and follow safeguarding procedures.

- If you have children in your room with you, consider using headphones so they don't overhear other people's stories, and when you share please be aware other participants might have children nearby. Please don't record or take a screen shot during this course.

You'll need to go through these in the first session and recap at the beginning of every new session.

How will you encourage participation and engagement through the session?

Use people's names when you are chatting to them – encourage participants to put their real names or a suitable nickname when joining the call. Your platform might allow you as the host of the call to change names if they are inappropriate nicknames or generic company names.

Make eye contact by looking directly into the camera as much as possible during the session. Watch Rob Parsons share about why eye contact is important.

Encourage participants to use the chat function to comment and ask questions during the videos and discussions – keeping them positive. Make sure you or your co-leader keep an eye on it, and respond to questions or comments posted there.

Encourage participants to use the polling or thumbs up and clap features as available on your chosen video software, and any other fun features except changing their backgrounds as that can be very off putting.
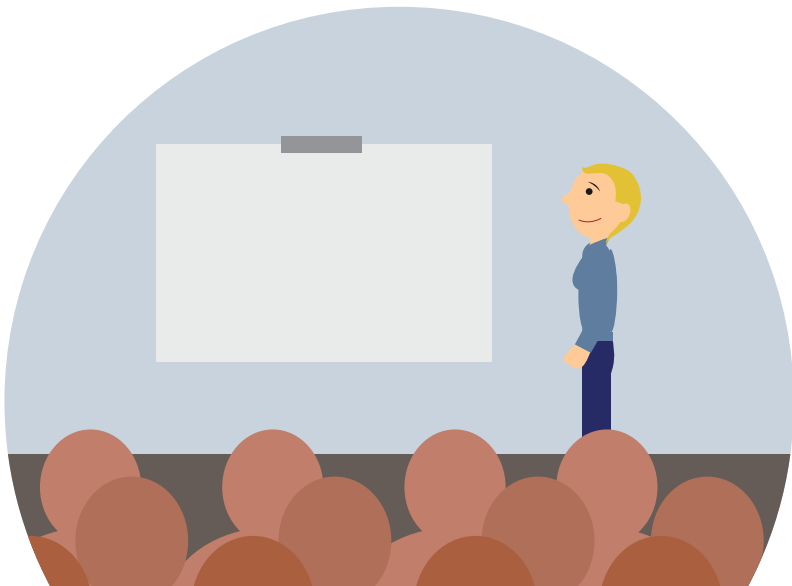
How is online discussion different to being in the room together?

Online discussions work differently; they don't seem to bounce around in the same way as when people are in the same room. One idea is to ask specific people to contribute, for example, "Kerry, have you anything to add?" or "Davinder, I wondered what you thought about this?"

It's especially difficult to stop people talking over each other on a video call. The technology may cause a delay when someone replies to you, and you might not get the usual responses of people nodding or laughing at what you've just said. Knowing this will help you when you start to wonder if anyone heard what you said!

How will you gather feedback?

Consider how you want to evaluate the course. Will you ask the participants to put 'one thing I'm taking away' into the chat at the end of each session? You might prefer to set up an online survey and put a link to it in the chat instead. Some platforms have a poll function, but it might be limited to multiple choice questions. Will you send them a pdf of the Care for the Family feedback form for that course? You might have to be creative and use a combination of all of these!

How do you end a session?

We have found that sticking to the time you stated helps people be confident in you as a group leader. You could say something like: "Unfortunately we've reached the end of the time for this session. It's been great to chat with you all, thanks so much for all your contributions. I'll be around for another 10 minutes if anyone wants to stay on the call and talk about anything else, but otherwise, thanks again for coming, see you next week, have a great evening!"

Will you encourage the participants to communicate with each other during the week between course sessions?

Once the course begins, you can ask permission from everyone to set up a WhatsApp or Facebook group so they can all share and chat with one another. You'll probably find you get through less content online than you would with a face to face group, so having somewhere to post other notes, links or articles between sessions might help them get the most from the course.

Share your stories

Care for the Family would love to hear about your experiences of leading a course online.

What top tips would you pass on to others?

Please email us on learning@cff.org.uk

For more helpful resources go to cff.org.uk

Care for the Family
Tovey House, Cleppa Park
Newport
NP10 8BA

cff.org.uk
mail@cff.org.uk

CTTRAOC01