

# Getting video calls to actually work

**Who this is for:** families, and anyone who wants the weekly call to just happen

**Reading time:** about 5 minutes

**In one line:** video calls fail for predictable reasons, and a call that happens every week without drama is a setup problem, not a skills problem.

Of everything we set up in people's homes, nothing is requested more than this: "I just want Mum to be able to video call us." And nothing produces more quiet joy when it finally works, week after week, without a production.

It is also the single best example of how technology fails older people. Because video calling is, on paper, solved. Every device does it. Every family tries it. And in home after home, it does not happen, or it happens once at Christmas with three people shouting "can you see us? tap the screen, no, the OTHER button" while Grandma looks stricken.

Here is why it fails, and the setup that fixes it.

## Why video calls fail

**Too many ways to do it.** FaceTime, WhatsApp, Messenger, Zoom, Skype if anyone remembers it. Each family member has a favourite, so the older person ends up with four apps that all do the same thing slightly differently. Confusion is not a user error here. Four overlapping apps *is* the confusing design.

**The call has too many steps.** Find the right app. Find the right person inside the app. Tap the right kind of call. Do not bump the mute button. For a confident user that is nothing. For an anxious one, it is four hurdles, and a stumble at any of them ends the attempt, quietly, forever.

**Audio and video gremlins.** The volume was down. The camera was covered by a thumb or a case. The device was flat because the charger lives in another room. Trivial causes, total failures.

**Nobody owns the rhythm.** Everyone wants calls in general; no one schedules them in particular. "Call anytime!" sounds warm and produces nothing, because spontaneous calls require confidence, and confidence is exactly what is missing.

**The first failure goes unfixed.** One call where nothing worked becomes "we tried that". The technology gets the blame, the subject gets dropped, and everyone politely retreats to birthday phone calls.

## The setup that works

**Pick one app. Family adapts to the person, not the other way round.** The right app is whichever one matches the person's device and reaches the whole family with the least friction. The family standardises on it for calls with that person, full stop. Adult children can manage two apps. Do not ask the least confident participant to do so.

**Make the call one tap from the home screen.** This is the heart of it. The person's screen should have one large, obvious target, ideally with a face on it, that starts a call to the right person. Modern phones and tablets can do this with shortcuts; done properly, "call Sarah" becomes literally one touch. Every step you remove roughly doubles the odds the call happens.

**Or remove the screen entirely.** For some people, the best video call setup has no tablet at all. A smart display in the kitchen that responds to "call Sarah", and that can be set to answer calls from approved family automatically, turns video calling into something that requires no hands and no menus. For someone with arthritis, low vision, or screen anxiety, this is the difference between never and weekly. Auto-answer is a serious decision that needs the person's genuine consent, but used well, within a trusted family, it is wonderful.

**Solve charging and placement once.** The device lives in one spot, on a stand, at face height, near a power point, where the light comes from in front rather than behind. A permanent home beats a wandering tablet. Backlit silhouettes and bird's-eye nostril shots are not technology failures, but they make calls feel bad, and feelings decide whether this continues.

**Set a standing time.** The single most effective thing in this guide is not technical. Sunday, 4pm, every week, same person initiating. A standing call removes the confidence tax of initiating and converts video calling from an event into a habit. Habits survive. Events do not.

**Write the recovery steps down.** A large-print card next to the device: what to do if there is no sound, if the screen is black, if the call drops. Three problems, three one-line fixes. The card is not really instructions. It is permission to not panic.

## The first month matters most

Whatever you set up, the first few weeks decide its fate. Expect a glitch or two, treat them cheerfully as setup problems rather than evidence, and fix them fast. If the person stumbles, the answer is never "here, I'll do it", it is doing it again, together, slower. By week five, when the call connects and nobody thought about the technology at all, you have built the thing that was actually wanted: not a working app, but a reliable way to see the people they love.

## When to get help

If the family has tried twice and it has not stuck, a third identical attempt rarely works. What works is someone patient setting it up properly in person: one app, one tap, one spot, one standing time, notes left behind, and a follow-up to catch the gremlins. That is an hour or two of work for us and it tends to stay fixed.

Gray Matter Solutions sets up video calling in homes across Sydney's Northern Beaches, North Shore, and Inner West, for older Australians and people with disability, funded through NDIS, Support at Home, or privately.

**Want the Sunday call to just work? Start with a free 15-minute call, the audio-only kind.** Email [phil@graymatter.team](mailto:phil@graymatter.team) or visit [graymatter.team](http://graymatter.team).

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**Want a hand with this?** Gray Matter Solutions provides patient, in-home technology support across the Northern Beaches, North Shore, and Inner West of Sydney, funded through NDIS, Support at Home, or privately. Start with a free 15-minute call: (02) 5761 0386, or [phil@graymatter.team](mailto:phil@graymatter.team). More free guides at [graymatter.team/insights/](http://graymatter.team/insights/).