

## Airman in Iraq connects with baby daughter

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FLORIDA TODAY

SATELLITE BEACH - Air Force Staff Sgt. Jessica Hernandez, held out her arms to hold her 5-month-old daughter, Makayla, waved to her, blew raspberries at her and sang "Old McDonald" to her -- all from 6,873 miles away.

Thanks to modern technology, the airman stationed in Iraq was able to visit with her daughter and family in Satellite Beach via an Internet video connection provided for free by the Freedom Calls Foundation.



**Baby talk** Air Force Staff Sergeant Jessica Hernandez' sister, Christina Yost, holds Makayla as Jessica holds her arms up for her baby. (Rik Jesse, FLORIDA TODAY)

"I was so excited -- my heart was beating really fast and I couldn't wait," Hernandez said from a conference room in one of Saddam Hussien's former Baghdad palaces.

"I thought it was awesome -- I didn't know anything like this could happen."

The Air Force deployed Hernandez in July to Iraq to fill in for an airman who had to make an emergency trip home. Makayla was just four months old.

Hernandez's husband, Senior Airman John Hernandez, is undergoing special training at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss., and couldn't take care of Makayla, so Susy Boyter had to care for her granddaughter while Hernandez is in Iraq.

Hernandez's brother, 25-year-old Rocky Yost, heard about the Freedom Calls Foundation from a co-worker, finagled the personal computer program to work on his new Apple computer and then, viola, his sister's image was projected onto a computer and the family's widescreen TV.

"Oh, I want to hold you," she told Makayla as the little girl reached for her mother's image on a computer screen. "I love you."

One by one, Hernandez's mom, sister, brother, two longtime friends and stepfather sat in front of the camera, holding Makayla and chatting.

She watched as Makayla began to cry for lunch.

"Unfortunately, I miss that, too," she said of her daughter's tears.

Then she saw Boyter feed the hungry baby a bottle of breast milk provided by a wet nurse at Eglin Air Force Base in Fort Walton Beach and sent each week to Boyter at a cost of \$200 for shipping.

"Do you give her a pacifier a lot? Does she sleep through the night now? Does she have any teeth?" she wanted to know. "How much are you feeding her?"

Hernandez was surprised to learn her little girl is chugging down six ounces of milk instead of the 4 ounces she was drinking before mom left. She can also hold the bottle on her own now and is eating baby foods, like carrots, squash and sweet potatoes.

But she definitely does not like green beans.

"We got a lot out of it," Boyter said. "Look how many oceans across it is. It's amazing."