

'Happy birthday, baby'

Technology lets mom stationed in Iraq send her love

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For a long time, it was just the two of them -- affectionate Kayla, who learned to blow kisses that mother Rachel Johnson could catch, even as far away as Iraq.

On Thursday evening, Kayla put on her Dora the Explorer party hat and waited for her classmates to arrive for her 4th birthday party at her grandparents' West Jackson Street home. At the same time, Army Staff Sgt. Rachel Johnson was staring at a computer screen at 4:30 a.m. in Iraq and waiting for her only child's face to appear.

The 30-year-old single mother was a little tired -- 10 months stationed in a war zone will do that to anyone. The Escambia High School graduate has two more months to go.

Suddenly, Kayla's grandfather, Nehemiah Johnson, yelled for Kayla to come to the computer room. With help from the Freedom Calls Foundation -- an organization that uses video conferencing to connect troops with their families -- Rachel would get to greet her daughter before Kayla's birthday party started in an hour.

"Mommy! Hey, Mommy, I love you," Kayla screeched at the computer screen, where she could see an image of her mother.

"Mommy, I got a balloon 'cuz it's my birthday!" Kayla said as her grandfather propped her up on a chair so that her mother could see her better.

"How old are you today?" Rachel asked.

Kayla shot her hand up in the air -- four fingers.



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Kayla Johnson, 4, gets birthday wishes Thursday from her mother, Army Staff Sgt. Rachel Johnson, with the help of a computer. Johnson, an Escambia High School grad, has been stationed in Iraq for 10 months.

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"This many," she said.

They talked for at least 30 minutes straight, just the two of them.

Kayla sang to her mother, as the two made hand motions together. Kayla counted to 10. To show her mother how tall she has grown, Kayla stood on the chair. Rachel sang And when Rachel started tearing up, Kayla walked over to the computer screen and started wiping it. "Don't cry, Mommy," she said.

Kayla suddenly ran out of the room and grabbed the presents her grandparents and her aunts and uncles gave her and showed them to her mother.

"You've got to come see my cake, too" Kayla said. "Mommy, hurry up. Hurry up before my party starts."

"I'll hurry," Rachel said. "Happy birthday, baby."