

Help parents and caregivers keep kids focused, interested, and balanced while learning from home.

At this point, the distance learning scenario isn't entirely new. We have more information about what works for kids and what doesn't. And the hope is that we -- parents, caregivers, teachers, and school leaders -- are now better prepared to support kids in their social, emotional, and academic growth during the pandemic.

What's true is that families are taking on much more responsibility for their kids' learning than ever before. And in order for distance learning to be successful, parents and caregivers need support.

First and foremost, we all should try to remember to come from a place of empathy for parents and caregivers, students, and teachers. Parents aren't trained teachers. And even trained educators have trouble teaching their own kids! These circumstances are a great reminder of how important teachers really are.

Also, kids may or may not talk much about the virus, distance learning, or how the pandemic has affected their social lives -- but they're feeling it. Parents and educators should try to lead with love, and remember that strong relationships with kids make for positive educational experiences.

With that foundation in place, here are some nitty-gritty tips to help parents and caregivers keep kids focused, interested, and balanced while learning from a distance:



Setting Up for Success

Make a space.

- Create a special, personalized corner of a room dedicated to learning, creating, and reading. Use a movable box or crate if space is precious. Let your kid help prepare the space for school, even if that just means putting a decorated pencil box next to the device they'll be using. Getting the space ready will help them get ready to learn.

Set a routine.

- Little kids need more structure, so make sure to let them know what to expect. You can create a visual schedule they can follow. Older kids can use a calendar, planner, chalkboard, or digital organizer to keep track of what's happening each day.
- Have them follow a routine as if they're going to school (getting dressed, brushing teeth, etc.) instead of lying in bed in their pajamas, which could lead to less learning.
- Breaks are really important, especially for kids with learning and attention issues, so make sure to build those in and break assignments into smaller pieces.

Review expectations.

- Go over what the school and teachers expect around online learning. Fill out this digital learning pledge with your young kids or co-create a learning agreement with tweens and teens to help set the tone for distance learning.

- Set some expectations of your own as well. When can your kid expect to spend time with you? When should they avoid interrupting you? What can they do in their downtime? Come up with a list of "must dos" and "may dos" together to cover the essentials and activities of choice.
- If kids are sharing devices with siblings, make sure they understand how the devices are to be shared, including who gets to do what on the device and when.



Staying Focused

Keep them close.

- When it's hard for your kid to focus, try to keep them close. Consider setting up nonverbal or one-word cues to help get them back on track.
- Depending on your circumstances, it may not be possible to keep your kid in sight all the time, but it'll definitely be harder to keep them on track if they're completely unsupervised. Try to make sure you or another family member has eyeballs on them as much as possible.

Encourage self-regulation.

- Talk to kids about the connection between bodies and brains and what happens in their bodies when they feel frustrated, excited, or sad. This awareness helps kids recognize and manage their emotions.
- If you have other devices in your house, keep them out of your kid's workspace if possible. This can also mean shutting down phones, keeping phones in a designated place for the day, and putting away remotes if temptation takes over.

Play pretend.

- Little kids feeling at loose ends might respond to some role playing. Cast your kid in the role of work partner, teacher, or researcher to help them stick to a task (and let you stick to yours!).
- Though older kids won't want to play pretend, they may respond to an honest conversation about taking on more responsibility (like chores, self-regulation, etc.) because they're older and gaining maturity. You might be surprised how they rise to the challenge in response.



Encouraging Ownership & Effort

Follow kids' interests and get input.

- If there are gaps in your kid's school day, remember that whatever your kid is into -- animals, Minecraft, magic -- can be used for learning. Read books, create science experiments, and do math related to favorite topics. Wide Open School has great choices, too!
- When deciding how to structure the day, ask kids what they prefer. Try to incorporate their choices into the plan. For instance, if math is the hardest subject for your kid, would they rather do it first or last? Why? Check in with them regularly about how distance learning is going.
- Communicate with your kid's teacher and encourage them to self-advocate for what they need. And model communication about your day, including the positives, challenges, and kindnesses.

Display work.

- Let kids hang up their drawings, writing, or other projects in your home. It shows them you're proud of their work and helps them value their learning.
- Even big kids like when you show pride in their work by bragging about their efforts and showing off their work. (But always ask before you post anything!)

Give detailed praise.

- Instead of saying "good job," try giving specific details about your kid's work. If they tried hard, let them know you noticed. Have they made progress? Used a new technique? In what ways are their efforts kind, clever, beautiful, or insightful?
- Also, encourage a growth mindset, which means reminding kids that it's not about being good or bad at something, but working toward getting better at it.



Managing Motivation

Start from strengths.

- Build a bridge from things your kid loves to school subjects they don't love -- yet. If they love sports but dislike reading, find a graphic novel about soccer to spark interest. Your kid's teacher can likely help with this, too, but they might need to communicate with you (and maybe your kid), to get the necessary information.

Presentation is everything.

- How you present an activity makes a huge difference in how kids feel about it. For little kids, whenever you can, frame tasks as games to make them more fun. Need to sort the laundry? Challenge your kid to a throwing contest of tossing clothes into the right pile. Or, let them use pieces of cereal as manipulatives for math problems and eat them when they've finished a problem.
- Sometimes tweens and teens seem to have a "bad attitude" that's really masking insecurity, boredom, or anxiety. They're often hoping we'll help them through it, even when it seems just the opposite. Staying calm, not taking things personally, and maintaining a sense of humor can go a long way.

Use natural consequences.

- While it might be tempting to "reward" your kid with screen use, that can set kids up to see screens as a coveted commodity. Instead, you can frame it as a timing issue: "We have three hours in the evening, so if you put strong effort into your work and finish, you'll have time to play your video game."
- If intrinsic motivation is hard to come by, you can incentivize effort and progress in a way that makes sense. Come up with ideas with your kid, set benchmarks, and praise the process along the way.



Making Room for Well-Being

Be a good friend to yourself.

- If your kid gets caught up saying negative things about themselves, encourage self-kindness by asking them what they would say to a friend in the same situation.
- The same goes for you: We often beat ourselves up as parents, but what would a good friend say to you? What would you say to your friend?
- Try creating a gratitude list together to give you a fresh perspective and focus.

Get help when you need it.

- You won't always know how to help your kid. Think about who could help fill in the gaps -- look to family, friends, teachers, and others for help. Sometimes having another adult take over removes the tricky parent/kid homework battle dynamic and lets you go back to just being a parent.
- Communicate with the school about how things are going, leading with positives first. Everyone's doing their best, AND it's important for teachers to know what's working and not working for your kid so they can get the help they need.

Use movement and humor.

- Sometimes we just need to move our bodies. Physical activity can lift our spirits and get our minds refreshed for learning. Try a lunchtime block walk or a 5-minute dance party to help everyone reset and bring new energy to the day.
- Finding the funny right now is helpful on every front, including learning and well-being. Be silly, make wacky connections, come up with crazy answers so your kids correct you -- whatever works!