

# How Parents Can Help Their Kids While Managing Distance Learning

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When Jennifer Szot sat down with her son to play a game involving mixed fractions, she found herself falling behind the fifth-grade math. "It took me five steps, and he did it in three," she said. The assignment was one of many that her son is expected to complete at home, when he's not working online, taking part in "live" classes, or participating in Google meetings with teachers. For Szot, who in regular life is a stay-at-home mother and volunteer, taking on the role of teacher, too, has been daunting.

"They teach everything differently," she said, making her approach to such problems seem obsolete. And there are other challenges, she tells me while shushing the family dog, starting with the need to scatter everyone throughout the house so that the four simultaneous video conferences don't clog the airwaves. She checks on her son while he's in "class" to make sure he's not secretly playing video games. She calms her 11<sup>th</sup>-grade daughter who is taking three A.P.

classes and worrying about how she'll manage the exams. Most of all, she tries to lower the collective stress that everyone feels under their roof, including her husband and 9<sup>th</sup>-grade daughter. "Nobody is sleeping well," she said.

Parents like Szot who've been repurposed as teachers or managers of their kids' schoolwork can benefit from the wisdom of experienced educators. Several teachers offered advice for mothers and fathers who need a hand:

**Start with fun.** "Try to have some fun before you get started," said Becky Van Ry, an elementary school science teacher. Run around the house or do some yoga.

**Build a routine.** Kids do best when the world is predictable, said psychologist and author Lisa Damour. Start with "aspirational" practices—everyone up by 7:00 a.m., class starts at 8:00 a.m.—and refine them as needed. Think of them as provisional routines, Damour said, which over time can become sturdy.

**Trust the teachers.** A lot of parents are sending around cool STEM projects and off-the-shelf English assignments. Though well-intended, such work shouldn't supplant the assignments given to students by their teachers. "The child's teacher is providing all they need," Van Ry said. "Teachers are trying to figure out the best system for doing this without overwhelming kids and their families." If a child

is desperate for supplemental work, fine. But otherwise, stick to what the teachers require.

**If you're stumped, turn it over to the teachers.** Making sense of and then explaining concepts that parents (might have) learned 30 years ago could be impossible. This is the time for kids to contact their teachers. "Teachers have office hours built into each day, so students have the opportunity to Google chat, Google Meet, email, or call their teachers," said Ben Krahn, who teaches English at Middlebury Union High School, in Vermont.

**Take frequent ten-minute walks, without a phone.**

Managing kids and their schoolwork at home, sometimes while juggling a job, will be frustrating. It also may be boring, Krahn said. If possible, retreat to the outdoors and walk, unburdened by smartphones.

**It requires the whole family.** "This isn't just a 'Mom's' job," said Neal Sharma, an eighth-grade English teacher at the Lawton C. Johnson Summit Middle School and father of four. Especially in bustling families like his own—Sharma and his wife work full-time—both parents need to take responsibility for helping their kids learn. This might take some creative juggling of schedules, but the at-home learning can't be left to one parent. And children crave their parents' attention, during the best of times. Though not a peaceful period, this odd disruption in ordinary life might

provide a rare window for some parents to spend quantity time with their children.

**Remember to wait.** Children take more time to process questions than adults might realize, said Vicky Tong, a middle-school science teacher, especially if the question isn't in writing. "You have to pause and give them time to consider an answer and resist the urge to jump in giving them clues to get to the right answer," she added. Being patient with a child's answer encourages thinking and builds confidence. Consciously waiting for kids to respond will also prevent parents from doing the work for them.

**Stifle your own perfectionism.** "Maybe their letter 'e' looks kind of wonky or it took them a long time to figure out 4x8. That's ok!" Tong said. Stay positive, offer upbeat feedback with as much specific detail as possible—not just a generic "good job"—and the child will be more apt to keep practicing. Repetition will lead to improvement which will inspire intrinsic motivation. Erin Hennessy, who teaches 7<sup>th</sup> grade English, echoed that view. "Remember that their work won't look perfect! They are kids and are learning. They need to learn to find their own mistakes."

**Reinforce positively.** When he's not teaching English or tending to his four kids, Sharma coaches high-school cross country and track. What he's found to be most helpful in both settings is encouragement. "Parents forget how

powerful praise can be," he said. It's "the best way to motivate and teach." Being upbeat during a global crisis might be unnatural, especially when parents themselves feel like freaking out, but highlighting what's right works for kids.

**Keep it low-key.** It's OK if your child doesn't finish something, "We're just getting started," Van Ry said about online learning. "Nobody knows what they're doing," she added. "Every family in the U.S. feels the same way." Krahne echoed that view. "There is something comforting to know that we are ALL in the same boat," he said.

Szot recognizes that fallout from the virus, including mandatory home-schooling, is much more dire for others. "I worry about families with underlying disease," she said, and for parents with special-needs children who have to make do at home. In the meantime, she's keeping an eye on the family's stress levels and letting the dog out when he gets riled up. "We have to accept the new norms, at least for the time being," she said.