

Strategies for Families: Tips for surviving when school is at home

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Good afternoon and welcome to Strategies for Families: Tips for Surviving When School is at Home. My name is Aimee Prange and I'm a licensed clinical social worker with nearly 25 years of experience with children and families. I'm also a parent of two boys ages, 11 and 13, who are going into sixth and eighth grades. I initially thought this program would be easy to create, but as I sat down and craft this, the information for today, I realize this topic is quite complex and it really took on a life of its own.

To quote the Centers for Disease Control, "Schools are an important part of the infrastructure of communities and play a critical role in supporting the whole child, not just their academic achievement." Seems like a pretty simple and fair statement, right? But these are not simple times. Last year, sending our kids to school was a no brainer. I don't know about you, but I think back to my own kids and last year at this time, summer vacation and camps were wrapping up and the excitement of seeing friends and getting back into the school routine were in the air. There was a buzz about who the new homeroom teacher was going to be and which team of teachers they would be assigned to hoping that they'd have at least one friend in their classes. And I guess probably on the same, on the other hand, I guess I should say there was also some fear and trepidation about how much homework there would be and nervous about the possibility of making new friends.

School uncertainty

But this year, there are entirely new and different fears unlike any year in the past. Today, whether you're a parent, a caregiver or a guardian of students in kindergarten through 12th grade, then you are likely in the midst of making a difficult choice about what your child's return to school in the fall will look like, and maybe for some of you, there was no choice at all. That decision was already made for you by your school districts. For some, the choices may include going back to school full time five days a week, for others, hybrid models have been proposed where maybe it's some level of in-person time and some level of virtual learning. And for others still, there's the fully virtual option. Other families are opting for or maybe continuing with homeschool models and leaving the public school offerings out of the equation.

Weighing these options is not an easy thing to do, and to be quite honest, it's a very personal and it's individual to every family. And while in-person in structure may offer easier access to school services, improved educational efficacy, more opportunities for social interaction and the obvious, return to work for you all, it also has a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure for your child than virtual instruction.

So it comes down to balancing your choice based on whether your child or children or members of your household are at increased risk of severe illness. It comes down to thinking about what are your child's academic needs? What's the prevalence of COVID-19 in your particular community? Is there some alternative or what are the options for school transportation? Is your school able to really execute on recommended guidelines for safety? How about your child's social, emotional wellbeing, their comfort and familiarity with the school's reopening plans? And then also what are your individual family's situational needs? That's a lot of stuff to factor in there.

So by no stretch of the imagination, is this a one size fits all decision. And what makes sense for your family may not make sense for my family or the person next door. We have to be very cognizant that this is personal and rather than criticizing or tearing each other down for our differing opinions or different conclusions, it's really important to support each other and acknowledge the strength that it took to come to a decision and feel good about that decision, right? And we may not even feel like it's the best, but it's sort of the least path of resistance. So whatever you decide for your family, that's for your family. And there's no room to judge each other on how we arrived at that decision.

When going to “school” means learning from home

Every home with school-aged children in America experienced that virtual school at home phenomenon this past winter and spring. And I don't want to confuse that with parents who homeschool their children. So school at home and homeschool are two different things.

And I don't know about you, but I really didn't anticipate that we would still be in this position for return to school this fall. And based on what I heard, a lot of schools were quite confident and hopeful that they would have a full reopening this year, in September or late August. But as we get closer, more and more schools are changing gears and planning for these hybrid or fully virtual scenarios. The bottom line is, we all want to be safe and avoid further exposure and spread of COVID-19. How we do that while ensuring that we try to have a stable economy, stable employment, and superior academic learning that's complex. And again, it's hard to say that there's one right answer. I don't know that we can do all of that.

Plan, plan, plan

You can't be too prepared, and really that's the bottom line. So as parents and caregivers and guardians, as much as I hate to say it, we have to prepare for every scenario just in case. Like they say, plan for the worst hope for the best. So if school is going to be virtual or some version of virtual, plan, plan, and then do a little bit more planning. Step back, and this may require the big poster board on the wall or get out the legal pad, but really evaluate what are your child's needs or if you have multiple children, depending on their age and their grade, these things are gonna vary. If you have a child in kindergarten through, I don't know, third, fourth grade, they are gonna need far more adult guidance and interaction than say a child in fifth grade through 12th grade.

But here's the thing, you know your child best, and you also know what level of guidance and support they're gonna need, or shall we say, let's be real, how much handholding do they need? Let me tell you, this past spring was a real learning experience for my husband and I. Our then fifth grader who's very quiet, he sat in front of the computer day in and day out working through his assignments that he was sent by email from his teachers. There was no synchronous learning, meaning like there was no classroom instruction. It was really all self-guided assignments. And when we checked in with him, he told us he was doing his work and turning in his assignments. But lo and behold, two weeks later, the emails from the teacher came in asking why he hadn't turned in any assignments.

Well, first of all, shame on us for not checking behind him. But second of all, when we asked, he told us he did them. Lesson learned very quickly that he needed a lot more oversight and hand holding than we had anticipated, especially being a two parent working household. That was hard. We kind of counted on the fact that our kids were old enough to be independent and do their work so that my husband and I could also still work. But that became apparent that that was not going to be the case.

So for you, do you need to arrange for you or your partner or someone else to sit with and help your child stay on task to be able to offer support and guidance? It's very easy for us to say that, "Hey, I'm not a teacher, that's not my job." Well, you're right, but these are very unusual circumstances, and this is an all hands on deck and we need to be part of the solution and not add to the problem. So, no, you don't have to be a teacher, but you have to be part of the team and partner with the teacher and find creative ways to keep your child engaged and on task. Because let me tell you, a fifth grade math was a lot harder than I remember fifth grade math being, and I don't really want to go back there and have to learn fifth grade math, but I can figure out ways to work with the teacher so that she can help my child where he's struggling, but I can keep them on task.

Other things to keep in mind, does your child have any kind of special learning needs or formal accommodations that in the form of an IEP or a 504 plan? Is your school going to be able to fulfill those obligations? And is it realistic to hold them to what's written in those plans? And if not, what's the school's alternative plan, because again, it may not be realistic for them to offer everything in those plans and we have to be a little bit flexible there.

The other questions are, what's your home setup? Do you have a designated school space? Is it free of other distractions? Do you have access to the appropriate technology and resources that you need? And then also thinking about, how about you? If you're able to work from home or continue to work from home, what are your work accommodations? If you're required to go back to the office or you're a frontline worker, who's gonna be there for your child? Is there a partner at home that will be at home or do you need some other adult support in the home? And then, you've got to figure out what other costs and coordination that has to go into play there. Does your employer allow any kind of flexible work schedule to accommodate the virtual school at home situation? Maybe it comes down to, you have to consider some type of formal leave of absence and knowing what are the options available to you if that becomes a scenario.

Blurred lines

When there's no separation of physical space between your work, your child, school and home, the lines can be blurred very quickly. So it's really important to set boundaries and keep schedules. And sometimes that can be easier said than done, but it's kind of a necessary evil. If you are not a master at one or both of those setting, the boundaries or keeping schedules, it's time for a crash course. If you have attended any of our other webinars in this COVID series, you've probably heard us talk about maintaining normalcy and routine during these complex and challenging times.

And while we've been in this for five plus months now, and you've probably settled in and adjusted to some type of new normal, there is a transition and a change between summer mode and school mode. Maybe you were lucky and fortunate enough to be in an area where summer camps still took place, or maybe your child had an opportunity to engage in some type of socialization. Maybe you were the camp counselor this summer, or maybe your kids were like mine and had a little more screen time than you would normally be comfortable with, but we've got to switch gears once again and find structure and balance and, think of that routine and those schedules really in the sense of as if you were leaving the house or going off to school.

Routines and schedules

What were your pre-COVID-19 routines like? And did that go out the window with a pandemic? Kudos to you if you were able to keep that in place, but consider getting back into a routine if that kind of got lost by the wayside. Just as kids tend to really thrive with structure and routine, guess what? So do we. You don't have to be a drill sergeant, but it does help when we set expectations and it helps to really reduce the number of tiers in the house and the potential for confrontations. Be clear on your expectations. In my house, our expectation, and we've been very clear on this, is that before you head downstairs in the morning, you've got to be dressed, morning hygiene routines have to be completed, and then before you even think about touching an electronic device or some type of remote control, you got to get breakfast and chores have to be done. So we expect the trash to be taken out and the dishwasher to be emptied. So our kids know that, and may need a little prompting and reminding now and then, but that's the routine, that's the expectation, and we kept that all summer long and that will continue as school years up again as well.

Chore charts

Visual cue: Board with cards that have chores listed on them and assigned to different children with magnets to identify which ones are complete. Bonus cards as well.

So on this slide, you can see, this is a picture of actually an older chore chart that we have used and we've modified it some now during the pandemic. But it might be helpful to have that extra visual aid so that expectations can be clear. There's no ambiguity there, no uncertainty. So we used to have a chore chart where you could choose and select chores to earn electronic time. Now we've kind of reconfigured the chart and the chores where there are required, like not optional chores. And then there are the additional optional ones if you want to earn some extra time. The required chores you have to do, you don't earn anything for that, that's sort of your rite of passage to live in the house. But unfortunately, I didn't have a chance to get a picture of that before today's presentation. But be creative. And again, you know what works in your house, you know what your kids will respond to and whether they're younger and using pictures or older, even up through high school, this does work, but it sets the routine, sets the expectation, and when it's visible, it creates greater accountability.

Schedules

The same thing with schedules. This is a sample of a schedule that my husband and I had created for our boys in the spring when we went virtual, because the school didn't really provide a very structured plan, if you will because they were still figuring it out like the rest of us. But we needed our boys to really have some kind of structure and schedules that mimicked what a typical school day look like, so we created that. And while maybe there wasn't always enough work to fit the

schedule, we found other things for them to do during those times, some supplemental things that would make sure that the time stretched and so they had a "school day" in our house that went from nine until 2:40. But we had to have that sense of kind of order, but it also, it worked out really well, and our boys followed the schedule because when we didn't have the schedule, it was pure chaos. And the alternative was the schoolwork wouldn't have gotten done. There would have been a lot of electronic time and a lot of interruptions of our work time with complaints that they were bored.

So our hope now for the fall is that with more structure and more time that the school has to put things in place, that we can get a schedule from them and kind of fit it to work between the hybrid in-person time and home time will work. We can make it very clear for our kids in a visual way on what the expectation is on how that day is going to go.

Something else to even consider is when you're creating schedules, consider the weekday kind of school day and afterschool schedule as well as the weekend schedule, so that there's also the distinction between what you expect and how things will run during the school week, and then also that there's downtime and flexible time on the weekend.

Networking

They say it takes a village and now more than ever do we need to rely on our community to help and support, and that includes support from a distance, right? So it's time to take advantage of your networking skills. You may want to supplement your child's learning with additional tutoring, maybe reaching out to a neighbor, local high school student or college student who can help fill in some of the gaps for your children to keep the learning going. I've heard lots of families talk about even forming like little pods or small groups of families, three or four families for the kids and hiring a private teacher to do some joint learning in the home, maybe even reaching out, are there substitute teachers in your area looking for some extra work? How about neighbors and other retired folks within the community who are likely a wealth of great information and skills that could be really valuable who could spend some time teaching your children in a variety of different ways and helping also so that you can get some of your work done.

My son's saxophone teacher, who used to come to the house in person before the pandemic, who was an older gentleman, certainly was not able to continue coming to our home once the pandemic hit. And he was not comfortable doing remote teaching. So we had to find somebody else. And so I did a little networking. I reached out through a Facebook local parent group and quickly found a college music major who was interested in providing lessons virtually, and he turned out to be amazing. And through that, I even hooked him up with a couple of my son's friends who were looking for lessons, and these boys actually decided in addition to the lessons that they wanted to

have a regular jam session. So they get together on FaceTime and there's three boys that just kind of play for the heck of it 'cause they liked it, but they also missed each other. And so it really ended up being a beautiful opportunity that probably never would have happened if they were in school. And so he stayed socially connected, he continues to grow musically. And we found someone in the community that we didn't even know was out there.

Schools across the country are working tirelessly to find the right solution that will meet the needs of the majority. But the reality is that no matter what direction they choose, it's not gonna be the best fit for everyone. Teachers have literally given up their summer vacations to create curriculums to fit a variety of scenarios, not knowing where school will take place. And yes, there will be missteps, it's not gonna be perfect, but we are all human and they've done their very best in a not great situation. So when you're criticizing how the spring went or what the fall might look like, stop for a moment and think about the fact that these folks have had relatively little time to make the magic happen. Most curriculums for our design, for in-person learning, they've been developed and perfected over years before ever being implemented. Our teachers have had literally like 12 weeks. So schools across the country have had to transform everything into virtual learning overnight with essentially no budget nor the experience to do this virtually. And they don't even have the infrastructure to support such a lofty goal. So the fact that they've even been able to pull it off is pretty spectacular. That'd be being said, there are amazing online educational sites out there that do have the expertise and the experience to help supplement your child's learning experience.

Resources

Visual cue:

- Khan Academy/ Kan Academy Kids
- Coursera
- Udemy
- Academic Earth
- edX
- Codeacademy
- Connections Academy
- [Database of educational resources](#)

So on this slide, I've provided you with a few of the many free options that are out there and there's even more options that are subscription based as well. But these are fantastic opportunities for people who really are in the business of mass, virtual, online learning.

Remaining open and flexible

Even with all the planning and preparing you do, no one can predict what the future holds. You know what they say about the best laid plans. So it's helpful to pause, take a deep breath and remind yourself that despite all your planning, there are some things we just don't have control of, and it is very easy to get caught up in the emotions when things change or don't go as we had hoped or planned. So don't spend too much time in that space.

It's okay to have the emotions, but don't linger because in the long run, it's not going to serve you, instead focus on the things which you can control. You can control the message you share with your children about what the school scenario will be. You can control whether that message is positive or negative. You can control your thought process in that this virtual learning is temporary, even if is temporary, is a little longer than we had hoped. This will not last forever. And you have control over how your kids structure their time and so on. So think about those things.

We have to allow ourselves to be flexible, and even if that is not part of our typical nature, and I'll be honest, this was a hard one for me. And I really had to spend time this summer avoiding the high emotion, Facebook posts, the lengthy rants about what school should be, about the possibilities and the predictions really so that I could remain open and flexible when the final decision was made. I also had to try not to focus on like the news reports on what other schools were doing, knowing that my school district might be different. And we just received the final decision that they're going with the hybrid model last night. So now that it's set and the design of it while less than ideal, I also know that there is high potential that this will change sometime before school starts. So I have to kind of remind myself that I can't control how this hybrid model is structured, and if I want my boys to be able to go to school, even if for a short period of time, then I got to go with the flow. Complaining about it, or being upset about it is not going to change the fact that it's already set, and I don't want to send a message to my kids that I'm dissatisfied, I want them to be optimistic and to give it a try and I want them to be open-minded. So now that I have the information, I've got to make the best of what is, but also I have to expect that things will continue to evolve and change as we go and learn. So my plan and part of my plan, plan, plan is my plan is to be ready and to be ready for anything.

You are not alone

We've talked about how overwhelming and stressful and confusing this all is, but the good news is you don't have to do this all alone. Every parent is contemplating the same things that you are. And as I mentioned earlier, even if you choose different school or learning paths for your children, it doesn't mean that one person is right or wrong. Again, we've got to support one another in our decisions and lift each other up through these hard times. And if it's helpful, find other families in

your area that have chosen a similar path. Stay in regular contact, have an ongoing dialogue with each other, how things are working out, share your experiences, come together as a community and advocate for your children. Reach out to friends, close family members and so forth, people who you really trust.

But also remember that you do not need to justify or defend your decision for your family. And if you find you're not receiving the support you need, let those other people know what would be helpful. We can't control other people's reactions or their behaviors, but we can control how we react and how we behave. So let your loved ones know that it seems like our opinions are differing, and while I respect your opinion, I ask that you also respect mine. It's okay that we share different thoughts on the school matter.

And if you need support beyond what friends or family can offer, or in addition to what they can offer, and you wanna talk to someone for just some independent guidance and consultation and resources, consider reaching out to Resources for Living. And you can talk with a clinician or a work-life consultant who can help you navigate this difficult time. There are a wealth of options and resources that you are likely not even aware are available to you.

You've got this

You are all good parents, caregivers, and guardians, trust yourself, you can do this. Don't let the little successes go by unnoticed, celebrate them all. You're human, so be kind to yourself and compassionate that you are doing your very best. It's okay if you make mistakes along the way, there are opportunities to course correct, and stay focused on what you can control, stay open and flexible and support each other.

Thank you so much for attending. I hope this was helpful for you, and I wish you all the very best. Thanks so much.

Resources For Living

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